Maheu Ducks Hill Questions About CIA Links to Mafia

By George Lardner Jr.
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A former FBI agent who reportedly served as a middleman in backstage dealings between the Mafia and the Central Intelligence Agency took the Fifth Amendment yesterday under questioning by Senate investigators.

Subpoenaed to testify before the Senate intelligence operations committee, Robert A. Maheu spent about an hour in closed session, but the committee's vice chairman, Sen. John G. Tower (R-Tex.), said the appearance was "unproductive to say the least."

Tower, who presided at the morning meeting, said committee members discussed immunizing Maheu from prosecution in order to secure his testimony, but reached no decision.

Once a top aide to billionaire Howard Hughes, Maheu reportedly recruited Mafia figure Johnny Roselli around 1960 for "a very sensitive assignment" with the CIA.

Chicago Mafia boss Sam Giancana and Roselli, who was Giancana's West Coast lieutenant, worked with the spy agency in a scheme to assassinate Fidel Castro, according to court records and recent statements of former CIA officials.

Accompanied by his attorney, Morton Galane of Las Vegas, Maheu refused to discuss the questions put to him by the committee or to say whether he wanted a grant of immunity before testifying. He said he was simply following his lawyer's advice.

Tower told reporters only that Maheu had invoked the Fifth Amendment "on many questions," includng "several questions of substance."

Chairman Frank Church (D-Idaho) was absent from the morning session because of other hearings. Tower said the committee would discuss its next step later. He said the senators would first have to weigh the value of his expected testimony.

Maheu returned with Galane unexpectedly yesterday afternoon, apparently for a brief negotiating session. Maheu declned to say why he had come back but it was understood his lawyer outlined what Maheu would say if granted immunity.

The committee huddled privately for more than an hour after Maheu left and

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then called the next witness, Richard Bissell, former chief of the CIA's clandestine operations division and a key official in anti-Castro activities during the closing days of the Eisenhower administration and the early months of President Kennedy's tenure.

Former CIA Director John A. McCone confirmed last week that the CIA had planned to assassinate Castro and took some steps toward that end before McCone became head of the agency in November of 1961.

According to Watergate burglar E. Howard Hunt Jr., who was a CIA officer at the time, Castro's assassination had been recommended by him in 1960 as a part of the Bay of Pigs invasion plan. Hunt has written that Bissell and Bissell's top aide, Tracy Barnes, were aware of the proposal and that Barnes told him it had been put in the hands of a "special group."

Bissell testified before the committee until shortly after 6 p.m. and will return Wednesday for further questioning. A committee spokesman said the senators are also expected to vote then on the question of immunity for Maheu.

By James K. W. Atherton—The Washington Post

Sen. John G. Tower, left, and Robert A. Maheu before Senate committee hearing.